

OCTOBER 4, 1976

THE WEST GERMAN ELECTION

ANNCR: VOA NEWS ANALYST RONALD J. DUNLAVEY DISCUSSES THE RESULTS OF SUNDAY'S WEST GERMAN ELECTION:

VOICE:

POLITICAL COMMENTATORS, PRIOR TO THE WEST GERMAN ELECTION, REPORTED THAT THE VOTERS REALLY DIDN'T HAVE TO WORRY MUCH ABOUT WHO WON, SINCE -- ECONOMICALLY, SOCIALLY AND POLITICALLY -- THE COUNTRY IS IN SUCH A STABLE CONDITION. THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN, THEY SAID, WAS REALLY VOID OF CRITICAL ISSUES, AND NEITHER OF THE PRINCIPAL CANDIDATES WAS PROPOSING ANY DRASTIC CHANGES IN POLICY.

WHICH RAISES AN INTERESTING QUESTION: WHY, THEN, WAS VOTER INTEREST SO GREAT -- AND WHY WAS THE TURNOUT ON ELECTION DAY ONE OF THE LARGEST, IF NOT THE LARGEST, IN WEST GERMAN HISTORY?

THE ANSWER SEEMS TO BE THAT ALTHOUGH THE VOTERS DID NOT HAVE TO DECIDE ABOUT ANY SPECIFIC CRITICAL ISSUES OF DOMESTIC OR FOREIGN POLICY, MANY OF THEM WERE APPARENTLY DEEPLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE LONG-RANGE DIRECTION OF THE COUNTRY. THERE WAS EVIDENT CONCERN THAT WEST GERMANY MIGHT BE DRIFTING GRADUALLY LEFTWARD, AND FEAR WAS EXPRESSED THAT IT MIGHT EVENTUALLY DEVELOP INTO A SOCIALIST WELFARE STATE. WHETHER OR NOT THIS FEAR WAS JUSTIFIED, IT ACCOUNTS -- MANY OBSERVERS BELIEVE -- NOT ONLY FOR THE LARGE VOTER TURNOUT, BUT ALSO FOR THE RESULTS OF THE ELECTION, WHICH SAW SIGNIFICANT GAINS FOR THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS AND THE BAVARIAN CHRISTIAN SOCIAL UNION. SO SUBSTANTIAL WERE THOSE GAINS, IN FACT -- AND SO GREAT THE POWER OF THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS IN PARLIAMENT -- THAT THERE ARE DOUBTS THAT CHANCELLOR SCHMIDT'S GOVERNMENT CAN SURVIVE A FULL FOUR-YEAR TERM.

INEVITABLY, THE CONSERVATIVE TREND APPARENT IN THE WEST GERMAN ELECTION IS GOING TO INVITE COMPARISON WITH THE SWEDISH ELECTION OF LAST MONTH IN WHICH THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY WAS VOTED OUT OF OFFICE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FORTY-FOUR YEARS. IT WOULD PROBABLY BE PREMATURE TO SEE IN THESE TWO ELECTIONS A MASSIVE CONTINENT-WIDE SWING TO THE RIGHT -- ESPECIALLY SINCE SOCIALISTS AND EVEN COMMUNISTS HAVE MADE RECENT GAINS IN FRANCE AND ITALY. BUT THERE IS AN EVIDENT TREND WHICH WILL BE CLOSELY WATCHED -- FOR EXAMPLE, IN BRITAIN, WHERE THE LABOR PARTY HAS ONLY A THIN MAJORITY AND WILL BE FACING ELECTIONS WITHIN THE NEXT THREE YEARS. AND EUROPEAN ELECTIONS THESE DAYS, IT WOULD SEEM, ARE NOT DETERMINED ONLY BY POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND CONCERN ABOUT SUCH MATTERS AS UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE WISDOM OF DETENTE. THERE ARE EVIDENTLY INTANGIBLES TO BE CONSIDERED, NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH IS A SHARPENED PERCEPTION OF THE LIMITS OF GOVERNMENTAL POWER, AND THE IMPACT OF THAT POWER ON THE LIVES -- AND LIFE-STYLES--OF INDIVIDUALS.